



Review Article

## Pornography addiction and adolescent sexuality

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### Abstract

Pornography addiction is rising in India due to easy access to the internet. Adolescence is a critical period for the development of sexuality. The lack of correct information and curiosity regarding sex and relationships make them turn to the world of pornography. The ill effects of pornography addiction lead into adulthood as well. India has a sexually active growing adolescent population, but educational, healthcare, and other related facilities do not make space for a nuanced understanding of adolescent sexuality primarily because of the social stigma attached. Measures should be taken to bridge this gap and raise awareness amongst adolescents.

### Introduction

“Pornography addiction” or “problematic pornographic use”, is a compulsive need to view pornography despite negative consequences. American Society of Addiction Medicine (ASAM), in 2011, recognised other forms which can be addictive, like food, sex, gambling, and shopping, along with psychoactive substances (Blum et al., 2022).

The upcoming edition of ICD-11 (2022) comprises the entity “compulsive sexual behaviour disorder (CSBD)” as an “impulsive control disorder”. It is defined as “a persistent pattern of failure to control intense, repetitive sexual impulses or urges resulting in repetitive sexual behaviour”. This differs from an addiction and is described more as an impulse dyscontrol entity (de Alarcón et al., 2019)

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“Problematic internet pornography viewing” is watching pornography on the internet, which is problematic for a person because of personal or social reasons, including the excessive time spent engaging in such activities rather than interacting with others, working, studying, and facilitating procrastination. Consequences include depressive and anxiety disorders, anger issues, poor interpersonal

relationships, impairment in occupational and social life, decreased productivity, or monetary losses (Dindo et al., 2017; Twohig et al., 2009).

The rates of pornographic addiction range from 3% to 6% in adults; however exact rates in adolescents remain unknown (Hegde et al., 2022). The internet's availability and speedier web connections have evolved the use and access of pornography over the last few decades. The need to consume pornographic content at all times could make them watch it in public places like work or public transit. The increasing availability and the curiosity amongst adolescents can make it a deadly combination. The taboo over this area amongst the general population, let alone adolescents, makes it difficult to tabulate the extent of the problem.

The consistent use of pornography may facilitate the escalation of craving due to certain metacognition changes, information processing, and problematic use leading to addictive behaviours. Multifactorial causation comprises biological factors where differences in brain structure or chemistry may make some people more likely to develop addictions (Hilton and Watts, 2011). Cultural influences like unhealthy or unrealistic societal and cultural attitudes about sex may contribute to pornography use. Other mental health conditions like comorbid addictions or other psychiatric illnesses might be more likely to engage in problematic pornography use.

### **Adolescent sexuality**

Adolescence is a critical stage in the human development. Adolescence is a transitional and a phase of transformation. All individuals undergo multiple physical, hormonal, and psychological changes. This impacts the developing mind and various organs. The development of secondary sexual characters and a natural curiosity aid in this process. Adolescents may be confused about their

changing bodies, often those who attain puberty earlier or later than their peers. Various hormonal changes make them feel new urges and emotions, which could make them anxious or excited (Kar et al., 2015).

Sexuality cannot be purely defined based on these biological changes that one undergoes. It is dynamic and fluid in nature. Sexuality may be envisioned as a lifelong process comprising various domains of experience such as emotional domains, different urges, feelings of motivation, attention techniques, aspects about oneself, processes related to the biology of an individual, personality factors, interpersonal ties, cultural prospects, social interaction and moral principles (Maddox et al., 2011).

The development of sexuality starts at conception. The experiences may define the critical shaping of one's sexuality during adolescence. The changes occur differently in both sexes due to the underlying biopsychosocial organization which drives sexual behaviour and functioning. Even though the sexuality of adolescents is a well-known and highly acknowledged topic, on the other hand, it is quite complicated and needs to be well understood (Massey et al., 2020). To conceptualise the challenges faced by adolescents, we need to account for various factors which act simultaneously. Adolescents are often susceptible to unsafe sexual behaviours, unprotected relationships, reproductive tract infections, social stigma, and sexual interactions that are non-consented. In India, adolescents deal with early marriages, unplanned pregnancies, sexual abuse, illiteracy, poor availability of health care, and insufficient information regarding sexual behaviour (Pirrone et al., 2022).

During the phase of adolescence, there is the entry of an individual to the genital phase from the phase of latency, and this genital phase throughout adolescence is maintained.

Sexuality remains inactive during the latent phase; however, during the genital phase, it becomes active (Kar et al., 2015). The need for intimate relationships with the other sex increases during adolescence. Developing a natural curiosity about one's body and sex fosters healthy sexual development. There is exploration among adolescents about various appropriate ways of lovemaking and intimacy. Adolescents investigate several acceptable methods of expressing their love and intimacy (Kar et al., 2015). Adolescent growth does not happen in a vacuum; rather, it happens in the family's and society's history in a particular culture, which affects the sexuality of adolescents.

In today's digital world and globalization, online platforms provide an important source of sexual behaviour modelling. As sex and healthy expression of one's sexuality may be considered taboo in our society, adolescents often shy from getting help from peers or parents, turning to the internet for help (Twhig et al., 2009). Adolescents, when struggling with sexual problems or dissatisfaction within their relationships, may view pornography. The unrealistic expectations after watching can lead to feeling inferior, fuelling poor body performance struggles (Pirrone et al., 2022).

They could struggle with internalising ideal norms brought on by inaccurate body image representation and excessive sexual engagement, which has negative social and self-esteem effects. Thus, this contributes to the inappropriate response to perceived predetermined behaviour and withdrawal from social and sexual activities and desires due to unreachable norms, creating a vicious circle (de Alarcón et al., 2019).

### **The problems: Effects of pornographic addiction**

The curiosity among adolescents about sex

and the availability of no proper and formal source of sex education is what makes adolescents watch pornography. Statistics on pornographic addiction are variable, but most studies estimate that pornography addiction is on a rising trend particularly among adolescents.

They denote that adolescents using pornography were more frequently males and at a more advanced pubertal stage, sensation seekers with weak or troubled relationships and family. Also, adolescents having a permissive attitude tended to be linked with sexual beliefs that were strongly gender-stereotyped. The rampant frequency of sexual intercourse, casual sex, multiple partners, early exposure to pornographic material, and sexual aggression, in both terms of perpetration and victimization, were also correlated (Massey et al., 2020; Pirrone et al., 2022; Massey et al., 2021).

Even though the Indian education system might slowly catch up to the need for comprehensive sexual education, there is still a dearth of information on sex-related topics. Because of this, adolescents turn to other informal sources of information, such as friends, movies, shows, social media, and pornographic material, being common sources of knowledge about sex-related information. Pornography serves this purpose but not in the right manner and is even a main source of knowledge on diverse sexualities and sexual practices (Maddox et al., 2011). Pornography fails to educate young people about the reproductive aspects of sex and the ethical negotiations surrounding sexuality, such as consent. It does not teach young people about relationship skills and safe sexual practices. Pornography can teach awareness and can foster acceptance of personal identities, sexualities, and bodies. Excessive pornographic use has also been associated with increased gender inequality and stronger beliefs in gender stereotypes associated with

sex. Pornography has fostered sexist attitudes and sexual objectification, particularly towards females in, resulting in negative impacts on how males regard females (Hegde et al., 2022).

Pornographic content has become more aggressive, with most scenes depicting acts of physical and verbal aggression. Themes in pornography exhibit males showing aggression and control and females being dominated; acts of aggression such as gagging, choking, and slapping; degradation and humiliation of women; women as objects of pleasure; unconventional and unrealistic forms of sex; unsafe and unprotected sexual practices; and engaging in sexual acts with multiple partners. Pornographic content displays sexual violence against females, which perpetuates sexual harassment of males and females. People who regularly engage with violent, pornographic material are more likely to be sexually aggressive compared to those who view non-violent pornographic material or those who do not engage with explicit sexual content at all. Those who frequently engage with explicit sexual material are more likely to be sexually aroused by violence. There has been a growing trend of adolescents who sexually assault other adolescents due to early or frequent exposure to pornographic content (Pirrone et al., 2022; Massey et al., 2021).

Quintessential working based on behavioural addiction, frustration when advised to reduce consumption, an inability to quit despite efforts, experiencing shame following pornography use but being unable to stop the habit, progressing to more extreme forms of pornography to find pleasure, finding sexual intercourse to be less satisfying, hiding pornographic viewing habits from others are few of the problems faced by them (Massey et al., 2020; Prause et al., 2015).

In some individuals, pornographic content may be used as a coping mechanism, a form of distraction from other psychosocial issues.

Such adolescents have poor social bonds, interpersonal relationships, and aggressive sexual patterns. If left unchecked can lead to a pervasive phenomenon that carries onto adulthood. Sexual behaviour in adolescents is a vital domain of their physical and mental health. In India, most of the population is in the reproductive age group. Thus, mentally and physically fit children make healthy adolescents and adults (Kar et al., 2015; Massey et al., 2020). The negative consequences of pornography for the using adolescent and the person with whom he/she shares an intimate relationship with present or in future. Addiction, isolation, increased aggression, distorted beliefs and perceptions about relationships and sexuality, negative facets they harbour about themselves, the neglect in other areas of their lives are the negative consequences that are often carried over into various other aspects of their lives, especially relationships among family and couple relationship. In intimacy within the couple, there are negative impacts that pornography can have in the following ways there may be difficulty that user may face difficulty in arousal when not watching pornography, sexual interest may reduce, and reduction in the frequency of intercourse with a partner. There may be harmful content in the partner's mind, such as infidelity content and feeling betrayed. The person may even feel inadequacy about oneself in a sexual context. The partner may feel objection about the sexual desires that the partner demands, and there may be an experience a decrease in satisfaction levels in their relationship and intimacy in a relationship in the partner and user (Massey et al., 2020; Kumar et al., 2022; Pirrone et al., 2022; Massey et al., 2021; Prause et al., 2015; Hall., 2021; Taylor., 2020; Peter and Valkenburg, 2016).

### **Implications**

The messages that sexualized materials convey impact how adolescents develop their identity,

attitudes, and beliefs, as well as their understanding of how society perceives them. Frequent engagement with pornographic content may also foster self-objectification, when one perceives his or her own body as an object of others' desires. Other psychological implications associated with the frequent use of pornographic material and exposure to other sexualized material include developing depression and low self-esteem. A damaging perception of one's body image can arise, associated with exposure to sexualized material (Pizzol et al., 2016). Depression and low self-esteem may also stem from body insecurities when one feels like he or she does not embody what society perceives to be attractive. Exposure to sexually explicit images can also pressure young people to take and send sexually exposing images of themselves to others, which may subject them to having their intimate images distributed without consent. This makes them susceptible to cyber bullying, sexual bullying, harassment, sexual abuse, child abuse, and sexual exploitation. These consequences may also distress or upset them and can damage mental and emotional health, increasing the likelihood of psychological and physical illnesses to manifest (Maddox et al., 2011; Seth and Srivastava., 2017).

The life-long consequences can involve almost all domains of life. There may also be some legal consequences. The protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012 criminalises sex with a minor and between minors. Any person who has sexual contact with anyone below 18 years is said to have committed sexual assault. Additionally, in a case where both participants are minors, the older participant or the boy is usually held guilty. Recently, on 4th February, 2021, the Bombay High Court said that consensual sex between minors is a grey area under POCSO Act since consent given by a minor is not considered to be valid consent in the eyes of the law (Kraus et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2000).

In the current scenario, we have multiple challenges due to the rising number of adolescents viewing pornography. The aforementioned effects, having legal and personal consequences, denote an important flaw: the dearth of proper and adequate sex education and the stigma around sex in our society. These two are the fuelling engines for this problem.

### Future directions

It is time our education system, healthcare facilities, and judicial and legal systems recognise the overlapping issues related to sexual behaviour among adolescents. India does have a growing adolescent population that either is or wants to be sexually active, yet educational, healthcare, and other related facilities do not make space for a nuanced understanding of adolescent sexuality primarily because of the social stigma attached to it. The first step should be to acknowledge the problem and start with corrective measures. As with other behavioral addiction, we have multiple ways of tackling these problems (Massey et al., 2020).

On an individual level, it can be managed by behavioural modification. For example cognitive behavioural therapy works by helping a person to identify, challenge and change patterns of thinking and behaving that fuel pornography use, connecting with others and experiencing emotional intimacy is a powerful tool in helping a person with this type of addiction. Finding something else that's worth doing more than intermingling with pornography develops intrinsic motivation and potential upward mobility in life. Medication could help with some cases of excessive pornography use. Pharmacologic interventions have focused on treating co-existing psychiatric disorders and targeting hyper sexual or compulsive sexual behaviours (Pizzol et al., 2016).



Theoretically, we need to put adolescents' use of pornography in the context of larger social and cultural developments. Many debates about adolescents and pornography may benefit from considering adolescents' use of pornography as a part of bigger developments rather than as a singular phenomenon of its own (Maddox et al., 2011).

The field needs to become more open to questions about the positive implications of adolescents' use of pornography, notably sexual pleasure, and address more strongly notions of differential susceptibility as well as resilience to pornography. Only with such a more encompassing view of adolescents' use of pornography can we achieve a more nuanced understanding of what pornography means to adolescents (Maddox et al., 2011; Massey et al., 2020).

On a community level, organising awareness programs regarding the ill effects of pornographic addiction, although it seems easy, will be difficult to carry out. Starting with as simple measures as basic sex and health education programs in schools, particularly for older adolescents, making freer communication channels, and carrying out open dialogues regarding healthily expressing one's sexuality can be thought of.

Further research is recommended to assess patterns of pornography use over time; correlates of harm; pornography use in defining and enacting adolescent sexuality; how emerging media will change exposure; and the cultural impacts of usage. The probability that young persons will have exposure to pornography prior to the age of 18 is very high (Kumar et al., 2022).

## **Conclusion**

Sexuality in adolescents is mostly a taboo topic with adolescents having poor access to the right information and help. Measures should

thus be taken to raise awareness amongst adolescents. Most of young adolescents have daily access to the Internet. Among them about 75 percent admit the consumption of pornographic content. Among these majority are boys and, about 20 percent turn out to be habitual to pornography (Quadara et al., 2016).

Pornography addiction is on a rising trend, even though it has severe implications on the personal life and causes harm to mental health. Pornographic addiction leads to unrealistic expectations, and failure fulfilling these expectations causes relationship issues and inter personal conflicts. The exact extent and number of people with pornographic addiction is unknown due to people's privacy; however, it seems to be a rising problematic issue in the future; thus, effective strategies to combat this are necessary. There is elasticity in the boundaries of pornography addiction; however, its definitions are transient, and its use depends on various claims about neurological knowledge and metaphor. Thus, it is suggestible that if pornographic addiction is being taken into serious consideration relationship between metaphor and nosology is important.

There is a need to protect the growing number of individuals from the potential ill effects of pornography usage that can cause while pushing back on non-scientific claims about the ill effects. Thus, promoting a healthy and positive perspective on sex simultaneously.

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